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Mineral King PR: Distorting the Statistics

A Letter Was the Tip

Here is a recent U.S. Forest Service news release on the results of public comment on the Mineral King Draft Environmental Statement. Shocking, isn't it?

After all these years of such vigorous Sierra Club activity fighting Disneyization of Mineral King, where were the members when their letters were needed?

Only a few hundred more would have put the opinion results on the other side. All that was needed was a sentence or two, with a few extra signatures.

Mickey Mouse is alive and well.
Lynn Ferrin

Mickey Mouse 56, Sierra Club 42

San Francisco—The Forest Service analysis of the comments on the Mineral King Draft Environmental Statement has been completed. Regional Forester Douglas Leisz indicated about 2,150 letters containing 4,400 signatures were received during the 90-day review period ending March 31.

Leisz noted that the analysis indicated 56 percent of people signing letters favored development, while 42 percent indicated opposition. The remainder of the response either favored development with modifications or did not indicate a preference.

The reasons noted most often in favor of development were that it would allow more skiing; year-round development; more people could use the area; and there is a need for more ski areas.

Reasons against development that were the most noted were the area should be left natural; development destroys natural beauty; the area should be in a national park; and development allows too many people in area.

The analysis, Leisz continued, revealed that most comments came from individuals and families, and were in the form of personal letters. Over half of the comments came from Southern California. About 10 percent of the response came from outside California and represented 42 states.

A majority of the comments from Southern California expressed support for recreational development of Mineral King. Local area response was about evenly divided between pro and con, while the majority of the comments from other areas indicated opposition to the proposed development.

Almost 1,000 copies of the draft environmental impact statement were distributed by the Forest Service with a request for comment on the document.

Many comments were directed at shortcomings or suggested revisions in various sections of the statement, Leisz said. The sections receiving the most comment pertained to recreation, fish and wildlife, transportation, socio-economics, public services and utilities, and air quality.

"The analysis process is an attempt to objectively portray the nature of the comments," Leisz concluded. "We are now in the process of evaluating the contents. We will use the response to revise the draft environmental statement where needed, and to prepare the final environmental statement for Mineral King."

The Facts and Figures

The statistics used by the Forest Service in its Mineral King press release, above, were the total of all signatures on all pieces of paper sent to them, according to Sequoia National Forest Supervisor John Leasure.

Signatures were found on 1,656 personal letters, 325 form letters, 93 petitions, 70 "reports" (long detailed statements), and six "miscellaneous."

A statistical picture more complex than the raw tally of signatures comes into focus on the basis of detailed information provided by Leasure.

For instance: Only 700 of the personal letters favored Mineral King's development. 921 opposed. (35 expressed no preference.)

Result: A mirror reversal of opinion percentages (56 percent opposing development; 42 percent favoring).

The "tilt" which produced the grand total of 2,477 signatures in favor of development (56 percent) over the 1,845 opposed (42 percent) occurred in the "form letter" and "reports" categories. (Petitions were a standoff—697 opposed; 687 in favor.)

Form letters produced 331 signatures favoring development, 22 signatures opposed.

The reports, or long detailed statements (such as the Sierra Club submitted), are the most interesting category. Of the 70 reports received, 36 were classified as expressing "no preference." Of the remainder, 19, bearing 31 signatures, were in opposition to development. Only 15 reports declared in favor. But these 15 favorable reports bore the signatures of 568 people!

One immediate question: Did those preparing the reports endorsing development know how the press release game would be played?

Another: If the figures had been exactly opposite, would the Forest Service, which favors development of Mineral King, have issued the same kind of matter-of-fact press release using grand totals only?

Supervisor Leasure was quite candid about the relative merit of the

input received. He said that while 1,000 copies of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement were distributed, only about 300-400 of the responders seemed to have read it in detail. He dismissed the form letters as being "mostly from ski clubs in Southern California." Many of the personal letters seemed "generated by editorials," he added.

Leasure acknowledged that "about 10 percent of the total response received will be of major help in evaluation of the Draft Environmental Statement. We were looking for the more substantial comments, not just 'I'm in favor' or 'I'm opposed'."

Leasure is on solid ground when he suggests that what he needs, as a Forest Service Supervisor, is quality and substance in the letters and reports.

But there is another game going on in the same ballpark. Here the Forest Service Public Information Office is pitching. The "management" has decided, as announced in its Draft Environmental Statement, it wants Mineral King developed.

In the Public Relations game, when you have some good statistics, you use them—and so, probably, will press and editorialists. If there are other, unused and not-so-favorable figures . . . Well, maybe nobody will ask about them. The *Yodeler* asked. (The *Yodeler* is the newspaper of the San Francisco Bay Chapter of the Sierra Club.)

So, Lynn Ferrin, thanks for the tip. It's important to play — and win — both games. Were we robbed in the P.R. game? More importantly, what effect will the P.R. defeat have on the outcome of the real game—the final decision about Mineral King?

Thanks also to the office of Congressman John Burton which was helpful in developing, on request, the statistics behind the press release.

Ken Hunter

(Syndicated by San Francisco Bay Chapter News Service)

VOLUNTEER

Newly appointed Sierra Club Foundation representative in Los Angeles, Stefano Barragato, needs volunteer help on a part-time basis involving work of a sensitive and confidential nature. Typing skills are necessary. Contact Mary Ferguson at 387-6482 for further information.

In This Issue

Farmland	Page 3
Earthcare	Pages 4, 5
Poison Bill	Page 6
Letters	Page 7

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